



## Communicating seduction. Luxury fashion advertisements in video campaigns

Paula von Wachenfeldt, Stockholm University, Fashion Studies

[paula.von.wachenfeldt@ims.su.se](mailto:paula.von.wachenfeldt@ims.su.se)

### Abstract

This study examines the different themes of communication that take place in video ad campaigns deriving from the French luxury fashion houses Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel, Cartier and Hermès. By using semiology as a method we were able to recognize the themes of adventure, seduction, love and play in the videos. This study explores also how the myth becomes an important meaning-maker of the luxury commodity and fills it with sensations and pleasure. Unlike all other ads, we could see that the meaning of luxury in the Hermès' ones was not directly connected to the objects per se but to the experience of human senses in contact with nature. We could further conclude that the visual communication of the ads has no need to be logical as long as it can seduce with its positive signs. The object of luxury constitutes a strong communication tool helping the viewer to discover new places, to fall in love, to create magic and to experience the amusement of play. Embedded in recognizable social narratives, the objects in the moving image are provided with a seductive meaning able to support the eternal myth of luxury.

### Keywords

video advertisement, communication, luxury, myth, seduction.

## 1 Introduction

"All you need is luxury", says the e-mail ad from the travelling site *Secrete Escapes* (personal e-mail, 2016) invoking one of Beatle's greatest hit where the word "love" has obviously been replaced by "luxury". Needless to say that the hit "All you need is love" reflected the very foundation of the hippie community ideals of the sixties, facing today a paradigm shift where luxury and self-indulgence represent the new interests of a globalised world.

The fashion industry has had a great role in communicating these material interests with the aim of selling dreams, aspirations and fantasies to the consumer. If fashion is the biological child of a commercial rationale it is largely due to its ephemeral nature. Renewal in styles and trends has been chiefly relying on advertising and marketing strategies. "Advertising has grounds for optimism", states accurately Gilles Lipovetski (1994, p. 156). Optimism in the sense that the consumer can never reach the end of his commercial daily life as he is repeatedly exposed

to the seductiveness and the magic of the renewed commodities.

If this logic of profit is characteristic of the fashion industry then we could presume that its luxury sector ought to be directed by different criteria. As we have investigated in "The Myth of Luxury in a Fashion World" (2018), a luxury brand relies by definition on its own cultural heritage sufficient in itself to uphold the reputation of the house. We argued however that communication and marketing strategies of luxury brands have joined the commercial principles of the fashion business, based on increased production and easy access to the products. In this joined business logic of fashion and luxury it is therefore tempting now to examine contemporary visual communication of five French luxury houses. For this purpose, we have selected twelve video ad campaigns for the houses Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel, Cartier and Hermès shot between 2006 and 2017. This selection is due to the recognition of these houses as classical luxury maisons with long tradition of craftsmanship and know-how, and therefore good representa-



tives of the luxury fashion sector. The objective is to explore the semiology of luxury fashion through the different themes of communication in the moving image and consequently, to understand the effects on the viewer. Following Barthes (1990, p. 10), we consider semiology as the analysis of the imaginary objects (in contrast to the real objects) leading us to the perception of the images raised by, in this case, the video ads. This method will enable us to discover the *meaning* that comes out from the collective representations of luxury fashion objects. We argue that this meaning in the luxury fashion world is connected to the myth as significant component of luxury. Claiming a priori that the experience of luxury is intimately connected to sensations and pleasure, we intend equally to look closer on how these two components interact in the “image-speech” so as to uphold the myth behind many luxury brands. Before being an object of premium quality, luxury is an abstract notion that represents the opulence and the refinement of the upper-class. This is, however, the outcome of the *mythification* of luxury as it had been reserved for the very few up to the nineteenth century. That said, the myth has continued to be a fundamental communication tool as it is the *condition sin qua non* of the essence of luxury. Considering the myth as a kind of speech, an oral or written message including any kind of writings or representations like photography, cinema, shows and publicity (Barthes, 2009, pp. 131–132), we intend thus to explore its embodiment in the campaign films.

We argue further that the materialization of the myth takes place through different social practices aiming to reinforce the consumer’s craving for luxury consumption. In this regard, we consider the act of consumption as being either subjective or interactive. The subjective consumption revolves around personal indulgence and is connected to sensations of comfort and pleasure. Visits to health resorts, culinary, travel and art experiences for instance are all representatives of this intimate enjoyment that appeals to the human senses and that have been rhetorically celebrated

by Voltaire in his poem *Le Mondain* from 1736 (von Wachenfeldt, 2013). The interactive consumption, on the other hand, follows the logic of social endorsement and emanates from an individual or group embracement of various communication practices where advertising is a powerful feature. This kind of consumption is additionally promoted today by the development of social media and the display of one’s material acquisitions on *Youtube* or *Instagram*, to name but a few, becoming hence a global feature of daily activities (von Wachenfeldt, 2012, 2015). Based on this assumption, we will also examine the kind of consumption that is advanced in the video ads and its role in preserving the myth of luxury in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We consider the myth as a leitmotiv of communication in the luxury fashion sector due to its capacity to bring into light the collectively unconscious and make it conscious. It is additionally a way to understand advertising as a communication tool and how it affects the consumer’s beliefs and behaviour. We will therefore be looking at the “image-speech” of the campaign ads and the socio-cultural practices that it embraces. This “image-speech” is composed of two modes: the picture in motion and the language. Advertising seen from a societal perspective, as it is the case here, draws on different theories including semiotics, literary studies and sociology (Hackley and Hackley, 2015, p. 19). Our investigation of the myth telling in advertising will consequently draw on theoretical perspectives from Barthes’ semiotics (2009) and Baudrillard’s and Lipovetsky’s social theories of consumption (1998, 2005, 1983, 1994).

## 2 Discovery, seduction and love

### 2.1 Louis Vuitton

The video ad campaign *The Spirit of travel* from Louis Vuitton Cruise 2016 Collection is filmed in the desert of Palm Springs, California, by the photographer Patrick Demarchelier. “A quest for freedom and adventure on the other side of the world is what the Louis Vuitton “spirit of trav-

el” is all about” says the introductory text on Louis Vuitton’s website. In this desert scenery we find the actresses Michelle Williams driving a car while Alicia Vikander, somewhere else in the desert, is walking with a pink Louis Vuitton handbag. A black and white snake is crawling towards her. To her voice saying “I don’t walk behind I find new path” the snake is now held in her fearless hands. This scene is followed by others where Vikander is surrounded by many Louis Vuitton trunks, and later on the actress is in a palm forest holding a new model of handbag, admiring the high palm trees that surround her. The whole video is imbued with the spirit of adventure and the excitement of new discoveries. To the voice of Vikander saying “Inspired by the past we make the future” the two actresses are finally united in the same scenes but without any real interaction, except for the handbags that each one of them carries along. In fact, the handbag appears to be the only thing they share in their travelling experience. “Above the ordinary to the extraordinary”, say now the two voices.

Many features in this video rely on the primary business focus of the Louis Vuitton house, namely “travel” and “bags” originally related to practical arrangements. But practicality is not a luxury attribute and thus a visionary world has to be created in order to communicate a meaning to the body of the brand. This is where the viewer can dive into the magic of the desert and the palm tree forest, getting hence the sense of adventure. Moreover, using celebrities in advertisement is quite a common feature but we would like to advance here that the personas of Williams and Vikander also correspond to the properties that the house wants to be associated with, namely success, talent and passion. The Golden Globe Award and Oscar nominations for Williams and the Oscar for Vikander can be considered as emblem of these properties. As such, they epitomize the “above the ordinary” embracing the supposedly outstanding character of a luxury house. Connecting further the commodities of the house to the human attributes of passion, talent and

success is a way of personifying them. We would like to draw a parallel here between this “humanisation” of the objects and the Voltairian rhetoric on luxury from 1736. As we have investigated in “The Language of Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France” (2013), luxury commodities are valuable because of the physical sensations they provide human beings. In this, the objects become one with the subject. In the same way, the Louis Vuitton handbag in the Cruise 2016 ad campaign is connected to the adventure of two cinema stars, sharing their experience of discovery travel. Abstract notions like adventure and freedom are given a life through the handbags. It is further interesting to see how the scenery of the ad (the image) is completed by the speech saying that the past is the keystone on which the future of the house is built upon. This “image-speech” links together past, adventure, success, celebrity and fantasy to perpetuate the mythical elements of luxury in the Louis Vuitton bag. Thanks to all these attributes, the house does not “walk behind”.

## 2.2 Dior

If travelling is a precious key theme for the French trunk maker from 1854, seduction and femininity can be attributed to the house that created the flower woman. The ad campaign *Lady Dior Grey London* by John Cameron Mitchell from 2010 is the story of attraction, magic and temptation. The French actress Marion Cotillard is a showgirl performing in a time glass before the enchanted public. While the red sand is slowly moving down the glass exposing her body bit by bit, the public is thrilled of excitement. Cotillard grasps her grey Dior handbag looking for something but then, with a tricky smile, puts it back to take out a key holder from her bustier. Slowly strolling with her key from one man to another, her eyes finally fall on the actor Sir Ian McKellen in a wheelchair. Indifferent to his physical disability, Cotillard throws over the key to him, and in the following scene he is in her dressing room. The same grey handbag is once again used to pick up a Dior pocket flask that she drinks from and handles over to McKellen. Cotil-

lard uncovers gently his paralysed legs and caresses them while he is still holding the Dior pocket flask in his hand. The magical touch of the French actress is still present in the next scene by means of a Dior pen that she takes out from the same handbag in order to help a painter to finish his painting. Once her missions are done she reappears elegantly dressed to the same handbag, applauded by the public and heading towards the exit door. The disabled man is shouting out his distress and the painter goes crazy on the canvas. There is a moment of wonder when the disabled suddenly rises up from his chair and the painter looks astonished at his beautiful portrait. Cotillard walks out towards the striking light and the enchantment of the moment is unmistakable. It is all in the handbag.

Dior's ad campaign involves the key elements of magic and seduction to communicate the spectacular character of the house. The leitmotif of the story imbeds the spectators in emotions of empathy, frustration and amazement, crowned by a catharsis at the end of the video. In this atmosphere of emotions and temptation, the Dior objects get a prominent role as they represent comfort and aid: the pocket flask relaxes, the pen provides help, and all of this is contained in the magic handbag carried by a seductive woman. In his analysis of advertising, Lipovetsky (1994) asserts that "Seductiveness can [...] be freely exploited for its own sake; it shows off as hyperspectacle, displaying the magic of artifice in stagings indifferent to the reality principle and to the logic of plausibility" (p. 158). Indeed, none of the features in the video are credible. Their role is thus to create an ersatz drama with a handbag, a pocket flask and a pen as important signifiers of a luxury brand. What remains by the spectator is a story of wonder where the Dior objects have the power to release. The brand's name is "humanized, given a soul and a psychology" (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 158). In this context, the luxury objects become indispensable in the illustration of sentiments and in people's contact with each other. This representation of luxury is, once again, connected to the human ex-

perience of emotions where the commodities are idealized for their healing power.

Dior's minute-long ad campaign from 2014 *The Future is Gold* by Jean-Baptiste Mondino for the perfume *J'adore* adds another compelling spectacle to the prestigious reputation of the house. Charlize Theron walks gracefully through La Galerie des Glaces at the Versailles palace when a long cloth in silk falls down from an opening in the ceiling, revealing a piece of the sky above. "The past can be beautiful" says Theron and climbs on the cloth towards the opening in the ceiling. "A memory, a dream [...] the only way out is up. It's not heaven, it's a new world, the future is gold, j'adore Dior" says the alluring voice of Theron. Unlike *Lady Dior Grey London*, this video does not involve emotions of empathy, frustration or distress. It is a commercial of a fantasy scene shot in a splendid place with a dazzling actress in gold, playing the seductive feminine woman. The colour of the clothing and the surroundings reflect directly the gold top of the perfume flacon of *J'adore*. Moreover, gold as an element represents luxury, chosen and used since ancient times by the royals. The features of palace, gold, beauty and femininity reflect all the qualities and characteristics that the house Dior wants to be associated with. These attributes take us further back to the idea of heritage where "the past can be beautiful". Heritage includes preservation of tradition and Dior as an haute couture house – and thus an institution of craftsmanship skills – can promote its image through the different features of the video. The perfume *J'adore* leads the way up to a new discovery and a new world. The luxury commodity is, de novo, full of sensations and reverie helping the human beings to explore new impressions. Needless to say that this commercial plays on the superlative and can certainly not be taken literally. But this is exactly the point: the superlative becomes a playful element in the ad and can therefore be easily adopted by the spectator. In fact, we are smoothly led to connect the fragrance Dior to beauty, splendour, high tailoring and not least playfulness. And we can almost smell it.

### 2.3 Chanel

Chanel No 5's commercial *Train de nuit* directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet and featuring the French actress Audrey Tautou offers another interesting themes of sensuality and discovery. Tautou catches up the train and while standing in the narrow corridor, a handsome young man passes by. A frozen moment where he cannot make a move while breathing her perfume and a mutual affinity arises. Well in her cabin, she poses the flacon of Chanel No 5 on the table. The train passes through different landscapes and the actress seems to be having a pleasant dream as her naked body moves in a sensual way between the sheets. The young man walks down the corridor and is about to knock on her door while, simultaneously, she is awake and can feel his presence. The flacon is shaking and its shadow is on the wall of the cabin. They never meet again on the train. Arriving to Istanbul, Tautou goes on a discovery trip in the oriental city when suddenly, on a boat, she catches the handsome man in the lens of her camera. In the next scene, she is back at the train station but stops suddenly when she feels somebody's presence in her back. The young man approaches her from behind and kisses her sensually on the shoulders and the neck. They are both standing in the middle of a mosaic floor with the Chanel's intertwined C in gold.

Love stories are many times kept alive thanks to the myth that surrounds them and because of the positive feelings they involve, regardless their end. They are therefore easily remembered. Remembrance is further an important element in advertising as the aim is to lead the consumer to the awareness of the product. A sensual meeting between two people is a recognizable feeling from reality or from cinema and by associating Chanel No 5 with it, the consumer can experience a certain familiarity. The perfume is the engine of this encounter revolving around beauty, sensations, and not least the unexpected. Like the commercial of Dior, Chanel pictures the seduction and the playfulness. While the first trait is present in every scene through the emotions of the actors,

the second relates to the implausibility of the end of the plot. Let us go back to Lipovetsky (1994) here when he describes the character of advertising that

does not seduce *homo psycho-analyticus*, but *homo ludens*. Its effective communication has to do with its playful superficiality, with the cocktail of images, sounds and meanings it offers without any concern for the constraints of reality or the seriousness of truth. (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 160).

In effect this “cocktail” is significant in communicating the message of Chanel's iconic fragrance. The video is shot in an exciting place (the scenes of the train and the sightseeing are charming) to the sound of the train rolling at night and to Billie Holiday's romantic song “I am a fool to want you”. Seduction has no need to be close to reality as long as it can nourish the myth that is embedded in many love stories. Let us emphasize here in, accordance with Barthes (2009, p. 131), that a myth is neither the object (the perfume flacon) nor the idea behind the object (luxury and love) but the mode of signification and the form that create a system of communication (p. XXX). Correspondingly, the ad campaign of Chanel No 5, is the form that contains the speech with its many signifiers conveying the discourse on beauty and sensuality of the luxury object.

### 2.4 Cartier

Other love stories are to be discovered in *The Proposal* from 2015, Sean Ellis video campaign for Cartier. The inauguration scene displays the recognizable French symbol, The Eiffel Tower, followed by scenes of three young couples that bump into each other hastily and accidentally without being acquainted. The scenes of the three love stories succeed each other resulting in a linear narrative: a couple in a taxi car is on its way to the airport, another one is at the Rodin Museum while the third represents a desperate man who is late to his rendez-vous. The girl at the Rodin Museum receives an image of the statue “Suzon” on her cell phone while her boyfriend suddenly disappears. The following

scene takes us to a dialogue at the airport where the woman is wondering why she is leaving and how much he will miss her, and in the next scene we see the desperate man running up the stairs to catch up his girlfriend in the elevator. “Je voulais rendre ton anniversaire plus mémorable”, says the young man with an obvious English accent while the elevator doors open up. The comicality of the situation appears here as he is using a non-existing word in French (rhyming possibly with *horrible*) and is therefore directly corrected by a lady in the elevator. Back to the airport scene, the couple is now kissing when the man, on the sly, takes his girlfriend’s passport out of her handbag. At the museum, the girl, once has reached the statue, gets another image-message representing this time a part of the Rodin statue “Le penseur”. The other young man is still running up the stairs after the elevator and at the airport, before the check-in desk, the woman is seeking desperately after her passport while he is helping her with her search. The tension is rising in the three narratives when, suddenly, the little famous red box of Cartier appears in the statue’s hand and is grabbed quickly by the boyfriend (who had placed it there); the other man is at his knee at the airport taking out one item at the time when he, at turn, presents the red box to his fiancée, and the third man finally reaches the right floor saying “je t’aime” while opening the red box. Moments of great surprise and happiness for everyone and the final scene of the video shows Rodin’s stunning sculpture “Le penseur” with the Eiffel Tower behind it. The short film ends up where it started, namely with the great symbol of Cartier’s national and cultural origin, the Eiffel Tower.

The theme of love is part of Cartier’s profile as the company has the iconic collection “Love” since the 1970’s. Love is also a strong emotional experience that can be recognized and sympathised with. What more is, these three love stories have a humoristic undertone that can easily mediate the message to the viewer: namely that love can be beautifully expressed and experienced with the help of a luxurious ring. Luxury here is connected to humour,

surprise and not least entertainment. The story of three young men offering amazing Cartier rings to their girlfriends might be perceived as a hyperbolic act but would this kind of overstatement trouble the viewer? Hackley and Hackley (2015, pp. 19–20) underline that “consumers are expected to be able to distinguish between untruth and humorous hyperbole, but the advertisers make every effort to blur this distinction” (p. XX). In fact, the viewer is rather seduced by the lovable storytelling and the beautiful jewellery as both features interplay in order to create the effect of seduction. The meaning is created through the charming attempts of the young men to obtain the acceptance for love and marriage through the agency of Cartier’s highly recognized aesthetics. This is the “immediate impression” that the myth aims at despite the irrationality of the action (Barthes, 2009, p. 155). In this, the myth encounters the nature of advertising itself since a fascinated consumer can take it for granted (Hackley and Hackley, 2015, p. 14). Also the theme of luxury, embodied in the Cartier objects, is highlighted through the supremacy of French culture as both the Eiffel tower and Rodin’s sculptural art figure strongly in the video. This results in a sophisticated view on luxury as high material culture. Cartier can thus firmly position itself as an honourable company with a long sociocultural heritage.

### 3 The natural and the playful

#### 3.1 Hermès

If adventure, magic, seduction and love have been recurrent themes in the advertising campaigns for Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel and Cartier, playfulness and nature would be the ones of Hermès’ commercials. The film *La fabrique de la Soie* directed by Craig McDean in 2016 takes us to Hermès’ silk workshop where the famous scarfs are produced. A model is either lying or running on the working tables where all the scarves are prepared. Throughout the remainder of the film, the same model plays around with the exquisite and colourful scarves, touching

them and rolling them around her body. This feeling of gaiety is accompanied by a cheerful and speedy music that reinforces the feeling of lightness, play and juvenility. These same sensations are illustrated in the video *Maxi-Twilly Cut* from 2016 where young models are skating in a real skatepark with the famous “carré de soie” bound around their neck, hair and wrists. The ad is groundbreaking as it reverses our view of the scarves as chic and reserved to a specific higher group. The commodity in the ad is part of the freedom of the play and as such, its meaning as luxury item is *naturalized*.

The earlier commercial *Bandanas de soie* from 2014 features the same idea of playfulness. A teenager is guiding her horse through Paris and in the following scene, her horse has been overtaken by other girls. The western theme is added to a Parisian setting with western music and fashion style accompanying the famous Hermès bandanas as horse blankets, flags and headbands. The young girl’s ability to interact with the horses and to control them enables her finally to get back her own one, guiding him happily back through Paris, as in the first scene.

Unlike the other houses investigated here, Hermès’ commercials do not involve any extraordinary features or intense emotions. The plot is often very simple and does not allude to luxury or opulence, neither does it take place in sophisticated places. The mini films of the perfume *Terre d’Hermès* illustrate well this particularity. Videos from 2006, 2013 and 2016 revolve all around the same features: earth, wind, water and horses. In the one from 2006 the plot takes place in nature with a man grabbing the sand in his hand to the sound of the horse gallop and the wind. The commercial from 2013 shows a man working the land and drying his sweat while a voice saying “From dust you are to dust you will return”. In the mini film from 2016 for the same perfume, we see a horse galloping, beautiful rock formations and a man diving in the ocean. The synergy between nature, horses and human beings are central in these commercials. The perfume’s name itself, *Terre* (earth), reflects the meaning of

the basic element of life and the films represent this meaning by connecting it to human sensations. And the commodity, in this case the perfume, is the bottle containing this synergy.

We can conclude here that Hermès’ video campaigns do not display any attributes of magic or seduction. The themes are basic, referring either to elements in nature or to the pleasure of playing. The representation of the Hermès commodities in the commercials above is in fact subordinated to nature or to amusement.

Nonetheless, in the latest commercial for the spring summer shoes collection 2017 the focus is on the feet wearing male and female sandals and other shoes from Hermès. The fast-changing images and the cheerful music create a rapid tempo in the film. But once again, there is no supplementary ornamentation, neither of the objects nor of the framing of the brand.

#### 4 The construction of magic-meaning

We have argued at the outset that sensations and pleasure are intimately connected to the experience of luxury and attempted to show how luxury brands make use of this connection in their video advertisements. We suggested further that consumption of luxury goods can be mainly of subjective or interactive type and in the following we intend to explore the kind of consumption that prevails in our advertising material.

The analysis of the twelve film ads identified different sensations emanating from the themes of discovery, magic, seduction and play. Pleasure, as a personal indulgence, is at the heart of the idea of consumerism and the condition *sine qua non* for its essence. In this regard, Baudrillard (1998, pp. 34–35) speaks of “le vertige de la réalité” that is realized through the consumer goods. In order to help us escape the “closure” of everydayness, mass communications offer a “simulacrum of the world”. This simulacrum, replacing reality, comforts us with the positive signs of security that are imbedded in the images. “Consumption is governed by a form of

*magical thinking*; daily life is governed by a mentality based on miraculous thinking”, states Baudrillard further (1998, p. 31). We have seen how this idea of magic embodied the themes of adventure, seduction and love identified in the ad campaigns. This “magical thinking” can be connected to the type of *subjective* consumption relying on the idea of personal indulgence filled with thrill and joy. Herein, the ads speak to the individual as if he would be specially chosen to experience the pleasure of luxury.

Moreover, since the ads build narratives with recognizable themes and emotions, their meaning can be easily adopted by the consumer. As a powerful communication tool they affect the consumer’s attitude and can therefore be associated with the *interactive* consumption. In this regard, they assist people in exploring new sensations through the luxury commodity: The Louis Vuitton bag promotes the discovery, the Chanel No 5 triggers love, the Dior bag does magic, the Cartier rings generate humor and surprise and finally, Hermès’ bandanas engender the play. The objects deriving from these houses are idealized for their capacity to create all these vibes and excitement, becoming therefore important symbols of the house’s luxury attribute.

We could advance further in the same vein that the “image-speech” represented in the ads supports and maintains the double function of the myth. Following Barthes (2009, p. 140), this double function “makes us understand something and it imposes it on us”. Correspondingly, the commodities are fed with meaning that is easily perceived by the consumer. And although this latter is helped through the understanding process of the myth, he still can’t distinguish its “semiological system” and sees it therefore as a “causal process” (Barthes, 2009, p. 156). If you carry a Louis Vuitton handbag you will experience magic places, if you use Chanel No 5 you might fall in love, if you wear a Dior bag you could create magic, if you buy a Cartier ring you will surprise and seduce and if you wear the Hermès bandanas you will gain the sense of play. Let us add another exam-

ple from the exclusive Swiss watch house Chopard. The printed ad “Happy Dreams” represents a young model jumping in the air with a happy smile while pointing out with her index towards the watch on her wrist. The cheerful physiognomy of the model in Chopard’s ad is in direct relation with the watch itself. The diamond watch makes people happy as it might realise their dreams. Watch and diamonds lead to or are the equivalent of happiness. That is what Barthes (2009, p. 156) calls “natural relationship” in the eyes of the observer. We prefer to term it as pseudo-natural relationship since it is a constructed one, using the material object to affect the state of mind. Seeing advertisement from a socio-cultural perspective, Hackley and Hackley (2015) state accurately that

advertisers provide the suggestion, and, as consumers, we complete the gestalt. Gestalt psychology refers to the way people complete the circle of meaning from partial cues or prompts. [...] Advertising plays with the grey area of meaning, using implicit connotation and suggestion as well as making explicit claims. (p. 18).

We suggest in consequence that the image-speech of the ads form a circle of different components that interact semantically with each other. The luxury object is embedded in different social narratives revolving around the themes of travel, attraction,

Figure 1: Myth of luxury





love and play. Each narrative generates the meaning of the object, connecting it further to the brand behind it. This would illustrate the Barthesian “causal process” as it is perceived by the consumer (Figure 1).

At the heart of this circle, we find the myth of luxury supported and perpetuated by the interaction of these four components. And what is the myth if not this “vertigo of reality”? This vertigo helps us to create an identity through the meaning of the object. Baudrillard (1998) points out that:

[y]ou never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 61).

A handbag from Louis Vuitton or a ring from Cartier helps us – at least at a mimetic level – to confirm our belonging to the higher group, both culturally and socially, or in any other case, to socialize with this group. If we moreover cannot purchase a Dior handbag, we can still buy the perfume of the house. “J’adore” is not only the ersatz of the costly dress but also of the lack of sensuality in daily life that can be compensated by the smell. The discourse of advertising consists of this particular ability to rock us in a recognizable security initiated by the narratives. Certainly, the viewer does not literally believe in the message of the ad: A handbag is not the adventure itself, the perfume cannot take us to heaven, a proposal does not require a full diamond ring and scarves do not necessarily entail playfulness. It is neither the rhetoric of the ad nor the information given by it that generate the direct effects on the consumer but the “underlying leitmotiv of protection and gratification” (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 181) that the ad compasses. These leitmotifs of pleasure, attraction, entertainment and love that we have seen and that have been represented through the luxury commodities constitute a so-

cial practice that is easy to relate to and to perceive. The myth of luxury that these ads maintain does not have to be reasonable for the consumer, as for him and for her, the real semantic features are not crucial as long as the message in the communication is conceivable and agreeable.

In this logic of belief lies also the strategy of personalization of commodities. *J’adore* talks to me as an individual, it is what the *I* worships. “I don’t walk behind I find new path” as Alicia Vikander says in the Louis Vuitton ad, “Je t’aime” as in Cartier’s one. The individualization suggests that the *I* is a strong selfhood that needs to be rewarded and responded to. Simply “Because I am worth it” as in L’Oréal’s ad.

Interestingly, Lipovetsky (1983, p. 155) in *L’ère du vide* considers mass consumption as a formula where the accessibility of all to cars, television, blue jeans and Coca-Cola coexists with the personalization and the accentuation of singularities. It is not surprising that this formula can be said to characterize fashionable objects. What is more remarkable though is that this communication strategy is even adopted by the luxury industry.

We could conclude from this that there is an ambiguous attitude when luxury brands meet advertising. Luxury is supposedly for the happy few while advertising aims at reaching everyone. Luxury speaks to a higher personal choice while advertising addresses the masses. Indeed, today’s communication of luxury plays on the mythical and unique image of the brand whilst adopting the seductive strategy of mass-mediated fashion goods.

## 5 Conclusion

We departed from the hypothesis that the myth is an important meaning-maker of luxury. The analysis of the video ad campaigns from Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel, Cartier and Hermès allowed us to see the recurrent presence of a hyperspectacle featuring adventure, magic, seduction and play, all of them being important units of the mythified luxury commodities. The representations of the objects in the short

films connect their existence to the human experience, giving them the power to discover, to heal, to seduce, to fall in love and to play. In this respect, the objects endorse the expected representation of the idea of luxury as something exceptional. Analyzing the different signs in every video has enabled us to identify the frequency of hyperbolism in the narratives. The ads in focus here were all based on the superlative as a tool to seduce and trigger the fantasy and the need of the viewer.

It is noteworthy that, unlike the other houses, Hermès' ads do not revolve around the extraordinary character of the objects but rather around the human experience, whether it is discovered through the contact with nature or with the elementary act of playing. The significance of luxury by Hermès is not connected to the objects per se but to the experience of senses. In that sense, the Hermès' commodity does not play a relevant role in the relation between humans and nature.

We could further see that every commodity is built on different recognizable social narratives that enable the perception of its meaning. Referring to travel, to seduction or to love is an experience that the viewers can easily relate to. In fact, the "image-speech" of the ads takes place through a circle of different components that secure the double function of the myth, being both understandable and controlling. Dazed by this seductive vertigo, we can effortlessly preserve the eternal myth of luxury.

## References

- Barthes, R. (1990). *The fashion system*. Translated by Mathew Ward and Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (2009). *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage Books.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society. Myths and structures*. Translated by Chris Turner. London: Sage.
- Baudrillard, J. (2005). *The system of objects*. Translated by James Benedict. London: Verso.
- Hackley, C. and Hackley, R.A. (2015). *Advertising and promotion*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.) London: Sage.
- Lipovetsky, G. (1983). *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Lipovetsky, G. (1994). *The empire of fashion. Dressing modern democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- von Wachenfeldt, P. (2018). "The Myth of Luxury in a Fashion World". *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, 5(3), 313–328.
- von Wachenfeldt, P. (2013). "The Language of Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France". In Hancock H. J. et al. Editors, *Fashion in Popular Culture. Literature, Media and Contemporary Studies* (pp. 209–223). Chicago: Intellect.
- von Wachenfeldt, P. (2012). Fashioning the self in pre-modern and post-modern society. Paper presented at Cimode (2012). 1<sup>o</sup> Congresso Internacional de Mode e Design. Guimarães: Universidade do Minho. Retrieved from <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/29259>, pp. 1362–1371.
- von Wachenfeldt, P. (2015). The taste of the good life: Representations of luxury in Swedish media. *Luxury, History, Culture, Consumption*, 2(2), 91–113.

## Videos

- Adit France (February 3, 2016). *The proposal*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qlvu4o60dNI555r>
- Chanel. (2011, March 8). *Train de Nuit – CHANEL N°5*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5r5PXBiwR0>
- Fashionistas Daily (June, 2011.). *Lady Dior Grey London*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keU74IKqltQ>
- Feelunique. (September 10, 2014.). *Dior J'adore. The Future is Gold*
- Hermès (September 13, 2016). *Maxi-twilly cut*. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EID\\_Acm0f0g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EID_Acm0f0g)
- Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlP0FfiHeiH8>
- Louis Vuitton. (2015, October 16). *The spirit of travel from Louis Vuitton*. Retrieved

- from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLq7HFkuFp4>
- LovE in the Mist (2017, May 27). *Hermès Spring Summer 2017 Shoe Collection*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2DqrFO5S14>
- PegaseBuzz. (2014, July 11). *Bandanas de Soie*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX4OQo4-Ns>
- Tendance Parfums. (2016, February 3). La pub Terre d’Hermès 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMwCT6j83a4>
- TheCologneReview. (2011, March 5). *Terre d’Hermès by Hermès International*. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu\\_TtoZbrks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu_TtoZbrks)
- Vivayce Channel. (2017, March 6). *La fabrique de la Soie*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-nXPAPaLcE>
- Wallace, S. (November 27, 2013, November 27). *Terre d’Hermès*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov8iLepmdB8>

